

REPORT

Committee to Develop Guidelines for Literacy: Selecting Appropriate Learning Media for Visually Handicapped Students

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Abstract

On June 8-9, 1990, a committee of experts in the field of education of visually handicapped students met at the American Printing House for the Blind to attempt to develop a set of guidelines to assist teachers of the visually handicapped in selecting the appropriate learning media for their students. This document is a brief report of that meeting and of the recommendations made by the committee. It is anticipated that a full set of guidelines based on these recommendations will be developed and published by the American Printing House for the Blind.

The finished guidelines will consist of the following sections:

- I. Introduction
- II. Statement of Basic Principles
- III. Assessment and Evaluation
- IV. Guidelines for Decision Making in Selection of Learning Media
- V. References
- VI. Appendices
 - A. Normative Data (Reading speeds, etc.)
 - B. Selected Assessment Batteries
 - C. Vignettes of:
 - 1. Total braille users
 - 2. Users of print with braille and auditory back-up
 - 3. Users of braille with print and auditory back-up
- VII. Future Considerations

The members of the committee making these recommendations are:

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Dr. Natalie Barraga, Professor Emeritus
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(Also a member of the Board of Directors, National Federation of the Blind)

Dr. Susan Spungin, Associate Executive Director
American Foundation for the Blind
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Note: The Introduction and Basic Principles sections which follow are drafts of recommendations made by the committee. They provide a brief statement of the basic principles, or philosophy, upon which the guidelines will be based.

Introduction

A major concern today for those who are educators of visually handicapped students is the appalling numbers of these children who could be described as functionally illiterate. A major emphasis is now being placed on attempting to identify these students and to determine the cause(s) for such illiteracy. At the present time, efforts to accomplish this have not been systematic nor well organized and very little data are available to assist in making a valid assessment of the problem. However, it is apparent to the majority of those concerned with the education of visually handicapped children that a major (perhaps THE major) reason for the fact that so many of these children are illiterate is that they do not have access to the learning medium which is most appropriate for their educational needs. Furthermore, many teachers and others who are involved in the educational programs of these children do not understand how to make decisions regarding the appropriate learning media. For this reason, the Department of Educational and Technical Research of the American Printing House for the Blind, upon the recommendation of their Educational Research and Development Committee, took the initiative in attempting to develop some specific guidelines for selecting appropriate learning media for visually handicapped children.

In order to accomplish this task, a committee of experts in the education of visually handicapped children was established and an initial set of recommendations for developing the guidelines was drafted. Members of the committee are listed in the abstract accompanying this report.

Target Population

The target population for the guidelines is teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, and others who are directly responsible for teaching visually handicapped children the skills they will need to become productive, competitive participants in the vocational fields they choose to enter as adults. The target student population addressed by the guidelines is primarily the population of moderate to severe low vision children for whom braille or a combination of braille and print might be the appropriate learning media and, also, low vision students who have deteriorating eye disorders which may lead to severe visual loss or total blindness.

The major goal of the guidelines is to insure that every visually handicapped student will have an adequate opportunity for learning, using the medium, or media, most appropriate for his/her needs--in other words, an adequate opportunity to become LITERATE!

The basic philosophy of those responsible for developing the recommendations is:

EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION IMPLIES EQUAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Section I:

BASIC PRINCIPLES

This section outlines some basic principles which should be understood by persons who are responsible for selecting the appropriate learning media for visually handicapped children. These are not necessarily inclusive of all principles related to this task, but encompass the major principles to be understood. They are as follows:

1. Both braille and print afford equal opportunity for mastery of basic literacy skills only if they are appropriately applied.
2. Learning is dynamic. The use of a given medium may change for the individual as academic and vocational demands change. (Continuous evaluation)
3. Students learn and develop as an individual not as a group.
4. Appropriately applied technology will enhance braille and/or print literacy skills if the devices provide quantities of well transcribed braille and high quality print displays. Audio presentation alone will not allow for details of grammar, spelling, and format.
5. A multidisciplinary approach to assessment, evaluation, and curriculum planning is essential in order to recommend a medium to meet all literacy demands.
6. Some students may benefit most from using print only.
7. Some students may benefit most from using braille only.
8. Some students may benefit most from using both print and braille. The degree to which a given student uses a specific medium will be influenced by many factors: age, general ability, visual and tactual functioning, visual prognosis, motivation, and academic/nonacademic demands, environmental conditions, and access to optical devices.
9. The expectations held for normally sighted students should be the same for visually handicapped students. Diminishing classroom or homework assignments or accepting less quality work may camouflage the need to change the medium.
10. Information on which to base decisions is collected over a period of time through systematic diagnostic teaching.
11. Some children with severe low vision may not demonstrate a preference for either visual or tactile preschool readiness materials. It is important that these children receive instruction with all media in order to determine student abilities in each.

12. Objective continuous assessment and diagnostic teaching will enhance the student's preferences for a dominant medium.
13. The key element for decision makers is to identify the medium that allows the student to be the most proficient.
14. The prevailing delivery systems should not influence the selection of a dominant learning medium. We must first decide what it is that is most appropriate for a given student and then design a delivery system to meet those needs.
15. The successful utilization of these guidelines rests with the parent and professional. Only with enthusiastically taught, carefully sequenced curriculum will the student have an opportunity to reach his full potential.
16. It may take an extended period of time for a student to master the multimedia he/she will be required to use.